

BY STATEMENT AND OMISSION:  
MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF SCHOOL FAILURE  
IN THE STANDARDS ERA

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore media content as a gauge of the dominant American cultural norms, values, and interests around school failure. I problematize the persistence of inequalities in American schools, and situate this problem in the historical context of the standards movement in American education in general and the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in 2002, in particular. To help construct this narrative of school failure, I anchor this history in the social structures of racial inequality, in the role of ideology in shaping policy and perception, and in the concept of exploring media representations to gain insight into the cultural understanding of each of these.

I center my investigation in a frame analysis of the content of newspaper articles from New York State, 2000-2006, which tell the story of school failure. The depictions of failure in schools, as represented in the news articles, are persistent ways to communicate mainstream social norms and values and to show who resides outside of that mainstream. This study showed, through analysis of the explanatory frames that emerged from the sample of articles, that the dominant American ideology of meritocracy, colorblindness, and equality of opportunity creates an understanding of failure is as an individual shortcoming, showing who isn't trying hard enough, who resides out of the mainstream, and who isn't normal—in this case, white, suburban, and middle-class. I argue that this understanding conceals real structural inequalities that make success all but impossible for many students and can impede efforts to at effective reform.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Roanne Bosch grew up on a small dairy goat farm in rural Western New York, the fourth of the five children of Peter and Laurie Bosch. Her parents, in their own ways, were quite nonconformist, and raised their children to not take the appearances for granted and to not accept the world as given. Roanne hasn't. After graduating in 1997 from Iroquois Central High School, where she was student government president, a writer for the student newspaper, and a runner in the varsity track and cross-country teams, Roanne went to Syracuse, New York, to study at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and to save the world. While she started in biology, Roanne quickly realized that she was much more interested in human interactions with their environment than she was in the environment itself. As an environmental studies major, then, she studied history, policy, and land use planning in addition to courses in biology and ecology. She busied herself with extra-curricular activities, serving as student government president, a Habitat for Humanity volunteer, an orientation leader, a college ambassador, a writing center volunteer, a writer for the student paper, and finding creative outlet through many studio art courses in clay, fibers, and sculpture. Upon graduation in 2001, magna cum laude and as class marshal, Roanne joined Teach For America and wound up in New Orleans, Louisiana as a high school English Language Arts teacher. Words and pictures did not prepare her for the extreme poverty, racial prejudice, and hopelessness she encountered. When the seeds of this thesis were planted in New Orleans classrooms, Roanne was ready: her passion for equality and justice, while focused primarily on environmental and food issues, had long been growing.

Before coming to the Department of Development Sociology at Cornell in 2004, Roanne needed to experience a little more of the world. She has biked through

Germany and Switzerland, farmed in Polvadera, New Mexico, thrown pots at Penland School of Crafts in Penland, North Carolina, cleaned salmon at a cannery in Cordova, Alaska, counted sagebrush for the Bureau of Land Management in Pocatello, Idaho, taken courses in literature, supervised 4Hers at the New York State Fair, become an aunt to eight nieces and nephews, and married a wonderful man. She plans to continue to work on education issues, to teach, and to enjoy life.

This thesis is dedicated to my dad,  
who first taught me to question,  
and to my husband,  
who has put up with it since.  
I love you both.

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The content analysis I did for this thesis would have taken me many more months if not for the help of my husband, Michael Sedelmeyer, stepping in as my research assistant. His tireless reading and coding, as well as his patient listening and advice when I needed to talk through another idea, was indispensable.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The American public school crisis is neither natural nor uniform, but particular and selective; it is a crisis of the poor, of the cities, of Latino and African-American communities. All the structures of privilege and oppression apparent in the larger society are mirrored in our schools.

William Ayers, *The Standards Fraud*, 2000

### ***School Failure and Inequality in an Era of Accountability***

Failing public schools are a national problem. This problem is not new, nor has it caught us unawares. The modern standards movement in education, resulting in numerous state high-stakes accountability systems and culminating nationally with 2001's No Child Left Behind Act (henceforth NCLB), signed into law by President Bush in 2002, has endeavored to remedy this failure ever since the National Commission on Excellence in Education warned America about a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" in their 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE 1983). Since the implementation of these accountability systems, our nation has become adept at school assessment: at measuring and reporting the successes and failures of individual schools and of specific groups of students within those schools. Different accountability systems have created new categories; under NCLB alone, we label schools as low performing, in need of improvement, making inadequate progress, in corrective action, restructuring, and, most generically, "on the list." In the public debate, however, these schools are known unequivocally as failing (Mintrop 2004). This information is made public under NCLB, which mandates that schools report test results in yearly school report cards. These report cards have created a glut of information about who is succeeding and who is failing where.

Failing schools are neither randomly nor evenly distributed across the country. In most instances, they are clustered in districts that have traditionally served disadvantaged minority populations (Mintrop 2004). In the academic fields of education and sociology, the connections between school performance, class, and race have long been established. It is understood, generally, that schools with a greater percentage of economically disadvantaged students and or as well as those with a greater percentage of non-white students will perform worse than those schools with smaller percentages of these students in measures of student achievement.

The scope of this paper does not allow me to explore very far into the questions of why failure happens. While I will touch on the structural and ideological explanations for why real progress has eluded schools, I primarily seek an understanding of the stories we tell ourselves about failure and success. NCLB is the latest development in the narrative of educational progress, both by creating failure and by effectively opening a window into the social understanding of school failure. The “failure events” that it has created in the form of the annual release of school report cards and in the preventive or corrective actions that schools take as failure looms make news events out of conditions and beliefs that have generally been under the radar. They open the door to journalists who generally report events rather than deeper social problems. In creating a story around these new events of failure, journalists rely upon the fixed frames of understanding that already exist in society. NCLB failure events thus allow us to see, through a careful reading of news, the “tip of the iceberg” of cultural understanding and expectations about schooling and failure that, were it not for these events, would likely remain hidden.

### ***Research Questions and Overview of the Thesis***

Media scholar Todd Gitlin asserts: “Any analytic approach to...any mass-mediated content must ask: What is the frame here? Why this frame and not another? What patterns are shared by the frames clamped over this event and the frames clamped over that one...? And then: What difference do the frames make for the larger world?” (2003, 7). I will take this analytic approach by conducting a frame analysis of the content of newspaper articles that tell the story of school failure. I will center my analysis in the historical context of the standards movement in general and NCLB in particular. This will begin Chapter Two, which will end with a discussion about the persistence of inequalities in American schools. Chapter Three will explore the theoretical framework of this study, namely the literatures around standard-based education reform and NCLB, the pervasiveness of social structures of racial inequality, the role of ideology in shaping policy and perception, and the value of exploring media representations to gain insight into the cultural understanding of each of these.

Chapter Four will contain my methods and a description of my data. I will continue the discussion of media representations that ended Chapter Three, now focusing on the method of frame analysis that I use to help unpack these representations. I will also describe the newspaper articles I use as data.

My analysis of these data in Chapter Five will then ask Gitlin’s first three questions of newspaper articles that discuss school failure. Specifically: How is failure framed? Is it failure of schools to adequately educate children, or is it failure of children to meet school standards? Who is blamed for failure? How might the current policy environment contribute to the framing of articles on school failure? How might a normative understanding of society contribute to the framing of articles on school failure?

Finally, I will connect the representations of school failure to our larger society, arguing that the frames used in these news articles run deeper than the day's news. Depictions of failure in schools carry strong messages about success and failure in America. They are persistent ways to communicate mainstream social norms and values and to show who resides outside of that mainstream. My discussion, then, will conclude in Chapter Six with Gitlin's final question: "What difference do the frames make for the larger world?"

## CHAPTER TWO

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

This chapter is organized to introduce and explain the impetus and growth of the standards movement in American education reform as the received narrative of educational progress, leading up to the current dominant federal standards-based education policy, the No Child Left Behind Act. I will discuss the inequalities in student achievement that persist across this reform movement that was launched, in part, to correct them.

#### ***Standards and Accountability: Countering the “Rising Tide of Mediocrity”***

After the National Commission on Education released *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, Terrell Bell, Reagan’s Secretary of Education, wrote: “The response to the publication...was overwhelming. Its impact by far exceeded my highest expectations...We had hit a responsive chord. Education was on everyone’s front burner” (quoted in Hunt and Staton, 1996). Considering the findings of the Commission and the language of the report, there was good reason for this to be true. Within the 36-page report, the Commission minced no words in explaining the reprehensible state of education in the United States: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves” (NCEE 1983). In a statement that echoes throughout the education community still today, they argued that the conditions were getting worse: “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (NCEE 1983).

This mediocrity, argued the Commission, threatened the American economy, our national security, and our strength as an international competitor (NCEE 1983, Harris and Herrington 2006, Kosar 2005). Along with revealing the shameful state of American education, they developed five recommended avenues through which to improve the situation: content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and fiscal support (NCEE 1983). The report woke Americans up to the reality of the classroom, and also set in course broad directives for change. Jack Jennings, director of the Center on Education Policy in Washington, D.C., explained that, “in the 1980s, education in the US ‘was decentralized and localized. *A Nation at Risk* helped to energize us and pull us together. Much of what has happened has flowed from the sense of urgency that it created” (quoted in Coeyman 2003). While many argue that *A Nation at Risk* shocked and admonished more than it prescribed, there is little disagreement that it, for the first time, placed education issues squarely on the national agenda (Kosar 2005).

The urgency that flowed from *A Nation at Risk* whipped the nation into a frenzy of reform ventures and federal goal setting. What this received history of American schools conceals, though, is the active role of the government in reproducing inequalities that these create poor conditions in so many schools. While it is difficult to argue that widespread mediocrity plagued schools, and continues to do so, the moral panic around “how we let this happen” draws attention away from the many ways that federal and state policies all but precluded poor schooling. The history of de jure and de facto inequalities is crowded: separate and unequal schooling, school funding that stems from property taxes, very little federal support of education, racial neighborhood segregation and redlining, failure to fully fund Head Start, and on and on. So while *A Nation at Risk* alerted the nation to mediocrity in all schools and supported an expanded role of the federal government in education reform, it is also

diverted attention from the role the government had in creating and reproducing that very mediocrity.

Nevertheless, the federal government did take action. A series of ventures into federal goal setting and legislation followed the 1983 publication. Among the first were the National Education Goals outlined by President George HW Bush and the nations' governors in 1989. They set six broad goals for education to be reached by 2000, challenging: "By the year 2000...every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so that they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy" (NEGP 1991). Following this, the Secretary of Labor issued the SCANS Report (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) titled: *What Work Requires of Schools* in 1991, describing the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in the workplace. The SCANS report built upon and extended many of the concepts set forth in *A Nation at Risk* (McREL 2006) and, unlike the diverse priorities of the National Education Goals, highlighted the role of education in facilitating social efficiency by creating good workers rather than good citizens or good social opportunities (Labaree 1997).

After this, the federal movement toward setting content and performance standards and mandating state assessments came closer to concrete policy than the previous more abstract goal setting. In 1994, President Clinton signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, creating a special council to certify national and state content and performance standards, opportunity-to-learn standards, and state assessments (McREL 2006). Three years later, in his 1997 State of the Union Address, he called for every state to adopt high national standards, and declared, "by 1999, every state should test every 4<sup>th</sup> grader in reading and every 8<sup>th</sup> grader in math to make sure these standards are met" (McREL 2006). By this time, experts agree that, while national



testing is not likely to happen, standards are “quietly going national” as states accept federal funding to align state curriculum with existing standardized test content (Hadderman 2003). These goals and policies, diverse as they may be, all follow a similar formula: raise standards and test students according to these standards, and you will improve student achievement. The belief in standards and accountability as the path to higher educational achievement had, by this time, become deeply entrenched in the national psyche.

While *A Nation at Risk* placed education issues squarely on the national agenda (Kosar 2005), many state governments had been moving to create standards and assessment policies prior to any federal legislation stipulating they must do so (Mintrop 2004). In 2001, *Education Week* reported that forty-seven states had adopted standards for English, math, social studies, and science (Kosar 2005). New York State was one of the states that began policies that link standards-based curriculum to strict accountability measures quite early, serving as a model for other states (Sipple 2006). In the mid-1990s, New York established a timeline, to begin in 2000, for eliminating the local diploma and requiring all students to meet the higher Regents diploma standards by 2007. The diverse school districts of New York: The “Big Five” districts of New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers; as well as the small city districts, suburban districts, and rural districts, have each invested heavily in these changes and grown their per pupil expenditures to help meet this “swift and substantial” push for higher standards (Sipple 2006).

### ***NCLB: Ending the “Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations”***

During his campaign for the presidency, George W. Bush campaigned on a domestic platform of education reform, repeatedly calling for the end of the “soft bigotry of low expectations” in American schools. His entreaty echoed two important

findings from education research: the achievement of children in American schools suffers from low expectations, and these low expectations fall disproportionately on minority children (Welner and Weitzman 2005). Bush planned to end this soft bigotry through accountability, linking incentives and penalties for schools to their students' assessment scores based on the theory that attaching consequences to low scores will motivate schools to better educate their students (Welner and Weitzman 2005). In his No Child Left Behind legislation, Bush proposed to make federal the standards-based reform theories and state policies that had been shaping the character of modern education reform. His agenda received bipartisan Congressional support. Republicans in Congress were pleased with NCLB's focus on local decision-making and the tightening of school accountability, and Democrats were happy with the increased role of the federal government in insuring that all students receive a rigorous education (Kosar 2005).

Though praised in some camps as a revolution, NCLB is more of an evolution. It builds on the past reforms discussed above and gives the federal government more authority over education (Kosar 2005). Most basically, NCLB is the most recent federal effort in a series of attempts to do something about educational achievement. It is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), first enacted in 1965 and reauthorized periodically ever since. Arguably the most important, and certainly the most well known, component of the ESEA is Title I, the federal government's single largest education aid program, designed to assist disadvantaged students (Ryan 2004). Like Goals 2000 and the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, NCLB seeks to remedy under-achievement by raising performance standards in schools. Like the other standards-raising proposals before it, NCLB is based on the premise that students will learn to the level at which they are taught. If students are to achieve at high levels, the policy declares that rigorous

curriculum standards must be in place and student's knowledge of the curriculum tested. Additionally, with the reauthorization and strengthening of Title I, it also renews the nation's commitment to meeting the higher needs of economically disadvantaged students. "All children," proclaims NCLB, deserve to attend schools with "challenging State academic achievement standards" (Kosar 2005).

NCLB should provide states with more funding: over six years, it has authorized the federal government to spend \$100 billion in education (Mintrop 2004). The revision of Title I in NCLB mandates how this money is distributed, and requires that in order to receive the federal monies allocated to all states, the states and their local school districts must comply with the ambitious goals and increased constraints of the Act. States must therefore develop "challenging" state content and performance standards, assessments aligned with these standards, and hold schools responsible for meeting them (Ryan 2004).

To this end, "test scores are the fuel that makes NCLB run" (Ryan 2004, 940). NCLB requires states and local education agencies to produce annual report cards that detail the performance of their students on state assessments. Parents are to be informed about how well their children performed, how well the school performed, and how well other schools in their local district performed. This performance data must be broken down into demographic subgroups on the basis of gender, race or ethnicity, student disability, economic disadvantage status, and English proficiency. Additionally, the report cards must contain graduation rates, professional qualifications of teachers, and percentages of students not tested (Fusarelli 2004). If their child's school is failing, parents must also be informed about its reason for failure and their options for alternatives (Kosar 2005).

Under NCLB, school failure is specifically, if variously, defined. The policy requires individual schools to meet targets that increase steadily towards the goal of

100% proficiency for all students by the 2013-14 school year. Target increases must take place at least every three years and in equal increments as prior years. These annual state targets are termed Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). If a school fails to make AYP for two consecutive years, as an aggregate or for any student subgroup, then the school is labeled “in need of improvement.” Schools labeled in this way are subject to a range of progressively more serious actions. First, they must develop a plan for improvement and are supposed to receive technical assistance to carry out this plan. Students in those schools are allowed to choose another public school in the same district, with accommodations made by the failing school to get them there. After three consecutive years, the students who have not departed for other schools must be provided with tutoring services from an outside provider, public or private. Schools failing to make AYP for a fourth consecutive year must take one of several measures that include replacing school staff or instituting a new curricula, and those that fail for a fifth year are forced to restructure, essentially handing control over to the state government which can reopen the school as a charter school, turn over management to a private company, or take over the school itself (Ryan 2004).

Student performance on state assessments, however, is not the only measure of a school’s success or failure. If a school fails to have at least 95% of its students, including 95% of each subgroup, sit for the annual state assessment, the school also fails to make AYP (Haas et al. 2005). This, in combination with the need for a school to make AYP with all disaggregated subgroups, leads to a reality in which AYP ends up being less about yearly achievement gains and more about hitting uniform benchmarks (Ryan 2004). While many schools certainly struggle with getting their aggregate student body to make AYP, most are finding that they are failing with certain subgroups when the assessment results are disaggregated. Under NCLB, if all AYP targets are not met, the entire school fails. Because of this, the list of failing

schools could contain model schools that have a recent influx of students with limited English proficiency who fall short in reading assessments to schools that grossly fail on multiple measures (Fusarelli 2004). While failure to meet AYP targets with historically underserved student populations, including nonwhite and economically disadvantaged students, are what lead many schools to be listed as failures (Kosar 2005), no distinction is made between these different levels of failure (Fusarelli 2004).

While I will talk about weaknesses in and opposition to NCLB in the next section and the following chapter, I think that it is important to stress what is positive about the policy. Most importantly, it alerts a broader public to the fact of underachieving schools and directs attention and resources the students whose academic needs the school system is failing to address (Fusarelli 2005). In the words of a Louisiana Board of Education member: “We will never reach our goals as a state if we don’t improve the performance of our poor and black students . . . If you don’t measure it, then you don’t count it. If you don’t count it, then you don’t pay attention...And if you don’t pay attention to it, then you don’t fix it” (Mizell, quoted in Fusarelli 2005, 75). Whether or not this particular fix can work, people are certainly paying attention to all the ways that schools are failing.

### ***Persistent Inequalities: “Tell Me the Zip Code of a Child...”***

Segregation continues to be a central problem in American public education, even after the *Brown* decision informed America that to separate educational facilities by race is inherently unequal. Twelve years after *Brown*, one finding in the Coleman Report (conducted in response to Section 402 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and officially titled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, 1966) controversially confirmed that widespread school segregation in the United States created an inequality of educational opportunity among black American students, who have higher test scores

if a majority of their peers are white (Rumberger and Palardy 2005). This suggested that being poor and black was a greater indicator of poor educational outcomes than is attending a school that is predominantly poor and black (Viadero 2006). Coleman reported that much of the observed difference in educational outcomes can be attributed to the home effect, and that black students suffer because of factors such as poorly educated parents and few books in the house. New interpretations of his data indicate that there is, and was, considerable evidence to suggest instead that racially segregated schools compromised black students' ability to achieve educational outcomes comparable to their white peers (Viadero 2006). Yet, according to many scholars (including Orfield and Lee 2005 and Rumberger and Palardy 2005), racial segregation is on the rise. Rumberger and Palardy report that more than 70% of black and Hispanic students attended predominantly minority schools in 2000, a higher percentage than did 30 years earlier.

While racial segregation is a challenging enough problem, it is also important to understand that "race is the social expression of power and privilege" (Freeman 2005, 190). These increasing levels of segregation must be viewed in the context of the strong correlation between race and poverty (Orfield and Lee 2005). Black and Hispanic students are more likely than their white peers to be poor, but are also more likely to attend high-poverty schools (Rumberger and Palardy 2005). It was this issue of school setting that was one of Coleman's main indicators of student achievement, but Rumberger and Palardy, who adopted Coleman's charge to find the causes of educational inequality using more current data, found that who you go to school with matters more than who you are (2005). The authors' data indicate that socioeconomic composition of schools has more predictive power than does racial composition, but Orfield and Lee warn us that it is minority students that are many times more likely to be in schools of concentrated poverty. So that while white students certainly suffer

from poverty, only 15 percent of intensely segregated white schools exist in concentrated poverty, compared to 88 percent of intensely segregated minority schools that experience these conditions (Orfield and Lee 2005, 9). Race and poverty simply do not lend themselves to disaggregation. Taken together, intense segregation and concentrated poverty explain most of the variance among test scores when schools or districts are compared (Kosar 2005). Education psychologist Howard Gardner simplifies the situation: “Tell me the zip code of a child and I will predict her chances of college completion and probable income” (quoted in Kosar 2005, 57).

Although Rumberger and Palardy’s study and others indicate that integration is linked to academic gain and increased life chances, there have been no significant positive education policies promoting desegregation since 1981 (Orfield and Lee 2005). Recent policies, including NCLB, have no desegregation elements. Additionally, others argue that the litigation movement that was the legacy of *Brown* and that helped to improve educational practice, policy, and results through the courts has come to a grinding halt in the standards era. Legal scholar Michael Heise explains: “If past education reformers and litigants found it difficult to penetrate factors located outside schools (school demographic profiles and funding levels), litigation efforts seeking to influence student achievement will encounter even greater difficulty” (2004, 1). The inherent complexity of student achievement makes it unlikely that litigation can step in and provide the tools to remedy intense segregation and concentrated poverty that policy has recently ignored.

### ***Summary***

The received narrative of educational progress through standards-based reform precludes asking one fundamental question: Are we actually making progress? True progress, it seems, would be in the direction of decreasing inequalities in educational

outcomes. Instead, the United States is become increasingly unequal in general, and there is little evidence that increasingly unequal inputs are producing more equal outputs. NCLB, it is argued, is simply a machine in service to the dominant social and cultural ideology, aligning the education world with the received rhetoric of reform (Carlson 2006). The supposed progress that it creates alongside enormous failure can be explained through academic discourse around the dominant American ideology. The following chapter explores this.



## CHAPTER THREE

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will explore the theoretical framework of this study. Specifically, I will discuss the literatures around standard-based education reform, the pervasiveness of social structures of racial inequality, and the value of exploring media representations to provide a context for the cultural understanding of both of these.

#### ***The Causes of and Solutions to Student Failure: Ideology Trumps Evidence?***

Although NCLB received bipartisan support in Congress, the two parties were not in agreement about the primary cause of educational underachievement. Democrats argued that failure is due to a lack of money and insufficient resources, especially for those children in poor and nonwhite school districts. Republicans, on the other hand, maintained that the schools themselves are performing inadequately, and that these problems could be solved by coercion: either raising standards or offering school choice (Kosar 2005). Kosar explains: “Rather than wrangle over primary causes, the two parties agreed to disagree and produced a policy that was an amalgam of all three solutions: more money, school choice, and standards-based reform” (2005, 189-90). NCLB was thus extolled by both parties as a strategy to turn around underperforming schools, but in order for the policy to pass at all, it had to be constructed in such a way so as to deemphasize the issues that led to underperformance and failure in the first place. Literacy scholar Richard Allington bluntly comments on the meretricious results of such bipartisan compromising: “The accumulated weight of thirty years of scientific evidence on the effects of federal testing and accountability requirements indicates that this approach is largely devoid

of any positive effects on student achievement. Is this new law another case of values trumping data? Of ideology trumping evidence?” (quoted in Johnson and Johnson 2006, 207).

Many scholars argue that Allington’s suggestion that NCLB is more about belief and less about evidence is accurate, especially considering the centrality of American meritocratic ideology in NCLB. An ideology is a set of cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes that underlie and to some degree justify the status quo (Johnson 1995). In the case of NCLB, the American beliefs in the merit of individual achievement and equality of opportunity infused in the policy conceal the structural inequalities described in the last chapter and, paradoxically, can preserve this unequal status quo. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva makes this relationship clearer by describing ideology more specifically as creating “meaning in the service of power” (2006, 25). He explains further that the central component of any dominant ideology is its “frames or *set paths for interpreting information*” (ibid, 26) and its “broad mental and moral frameworks or ‘grids’ that social groups use to make sense of the world, to decide what is right or wrong, true or false, important or unimportant” (2001, 62). By portraying race and wealth as irrelevant to student success and focusing instead on the mainstream American ideals of meritocracy, egalitarianism, and color-blindness, the dominant American cultural ideology requires that we ignore current inequalities that fall primarily along racial and economic lines, that we eschew the idea that certain groups are more privileged than others, and that we believe in an America that presents equal opportunity for all regardless of race or economic status.

The argument that a political ideology blind to structural difference cannot create structural equality is especially relevant to NCLB. Evidence indicates that standards-based education reforms like NCLB likely do very little to ensure that no child is left behind. Gary Orfield has explained that this happens because these

reforms, especially NCLB, emerge out of an uninformed partisan approach to policy: “Almost none of the researchers who had serious knowledge about the effects of legislation on poor children were invited to testify about this legislation before either the House or Senate...What emerged was a bill that reflected none of what is known in educational research, primarily because of the extremely partisan processing: an almost complete rejection of everything, except some research on phonics. What emerged was an 1100 page document calling for impossible achievements that have never been accomplished anywhere; use of 50 different sets of standards; and very rigid sanctions. Some of these sanctions are going to take hold this Fall for thousands of schools and the states are utterly unprepared to implement them—there is nothing in the law that will equalize the schools before they are sanctioned” (Orfield quoted in Lester 2004).

Orfield’s writing and the work of his Civil Rights Project are part of the literature that questions the efficacy of standards-based reform in general and NCLB in particular. The critique ranges from reservation about resultant pedagogical shifts and the dubious dependence on testing, to inequitable outcomes in performance and resource allocation and the subtle shift of responsibility away from the powerful. The literature dealing with this last pair of concerns is the domain of the Civil Rights Project, and is especially compelling considering the political conditions under which NCLB was forged and passed with bipartisan support. When a policy legislates solutions to a broad social problem in such a way that the causes of the problem are disregarded, it seems unlikely that the policy will bring about real or lasting change at the root of the problem. In the case of NCLB, compelling evidence exists to indicate that standards are not enough to break the cycle of inequity found between white and minority students, between suburban and inner city or rural students, and between wealthy and poor students (Kozol 2005, Johnson and Johnson 2006). Many question

the belief that shame-type punitive actions, threats, and coercion are effective ways to motivate people to make even moderate changes. This punitive “success or else” nature that defines NCLB is described as a detrimental distraction that flies in the face of decades of research on motivation and effective leadership theory (Fusarelli 2004).

Further, the belief in the power of these standards and in the effectiveness of incentives and sanctions are also in service to the meritocratic ideology in that they conceal the deeper social inequalities of racial and economic segregation that structure educational opportunity. Orfield and Lee assert that, at their worst, the NCLB policies require more from schools with higher percentages of minorities and penalize them for their unequal opportunities. They argue: “Well intentioned policies that ignore the profound inequalities between schools risk blaming the victims of the segregation policies and punishing them and their schools for the consequences of segregation” (2005, 19). Already, the demographic subgroup provisions for AYP have resulted in the disproportionate failure to make AYP for those schools with many non-white subgroups (Kosar 2005). Novak and Fuller, in a 2003 study of California schools, asked if failure to meet AYP targets was driven by average test scores or the number of subgroups. Attempting to control for the effects of social class background by sorting schools into groups based on community income, they found, first, that the percentage of schools meeting AYP targets is strongly related to the number of student subgroups. The greater the amount of subgroups, the less likely a school was to make AYP. Second, those schools serving low-income communities are, on average, less likely to meet AYP targets. They found that these patterns were strongly evident even when average test scores across schools are held constant. They conclude that the structure of NCLB contains more of what they call ‘trip wires’ that set off failure in schools that have more diverse populations, and that there is nothing in the policy to account for the potential increased negative effect of having many students who fall

into multiple subgroups of ethnicity, class disadvantage, and limited English proficiency. They argue NCLB simply triggers more sanctions as the number of demographic subgroups increases (Novak and Fuller 2003).

The idea that NCLB policies ignore the profound inequalities between schools and, as a result, require more from and disproportionately penalize schools with high minority populations is explained by some critics as essentially racist. Eric Freeman explains this by characterizing NCLB as ‘postracial:’ part of a package of colorblind racism that “claims that race no longer constitutes a significant barrier to social and economic participation...equality is a fact of law, everyone is treated the same, and racism persists because of individual ignorance rather than because of institutional failings” (2005, 190-1). ‘Postracist’ policy rests on the notion that race has lost social relevancy, masking or deliberately overlooking the systemic nature of racial stratification and serving to deflect claims of marginalized groups and neutralize challenges to the existing racial order. In the post-civil rights era, this colorblind ideology has allowed whites to insist that race is no longer a relevant explanation for contemporary forms of inequality, a position that artfully maintains the very same relations of domination and racial superiority that racial ideologies have long explained. Although this color-blind ideology is ahistorical and ignores many of the realities of gross racial inequalities, its simplistic logic continues to pervade. By inventing a racially assimilated society in which race is portrayed as irrelevant, this ideology and the scholars and politicians who promote it serve to reinforce the current racial order (Ebert 2004). Bluntly: “what Americans see as the color-blind ideal—an American value for which we must ceaselessly strive—is really nothing more than an ideology of racial subjugation that perpetuates long-established inequality” (Ebert 2004, 174-5).

The scholars that support the point of view that race is indeed still relevant maintain that while “white privilege was formerly achieved through obvious, overt, and explicitly racial practices...today it is accomplished through much more institutional, subtle, and apparently nonracial means” (Ebert 2004, 179). Ebert goes on to explain that, although names for this new racism differ (e.g., “competitive” [Essed, 1996], “contemporary” [Dovidio 2001, Forman 2001], “color-blind” [Bonillo-Silva 2001], “symbolic” [Sears 1998], “modern” [Kinder and Sanders 1996], and “laissez-faire” [Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997]), the authors agree that racism has evolved rather than diminished since the 1960s. Their understanding of the legacy of the civil rights movement is not, as many Americans believe, that race and racial inequality have ceased to be relevant, but that the structure of racial dominance has become invisible. Brown et al. explain how this has happened: “Given America’s history, why should anyone be surprised to find white privilege so woven into the unexamined institutional practices, habits of mind, and received truths that Americans barely see it? After three decades of simply admitting Asian American, Latino American, and African American individuals into institutions that remain static in terms of culture, values, and practices, the inadequacy of that solution should be obvious... With the clarity of hindsight, we can now see that it was naïve to believe America could wipe out three hundred years of physical, legal, cultural, spiritual, and political oppression based on race in a mere thirty years” (2003, 4). NCLB, by treating schools as discrete domains of inequality that are ostensibly removed from the inequalities of larger society, allows policy makers and the public to ignore current societal inequalities that fall primarily along racial lines and to make the advantages of being ‘normal’ (that is, white and middle class) appear as a logical consequence of the natural order of things (Freeman 2005). While NCLB requires that schools report achievement of all groups of students by race and class, and that these groups all make

adequate progress, it does not address the structural inequalities that have created the glaring inequalities in performance between minority or poor groups and their white, well-off peers. Bonilla-Silva explains that these facts of systematic discrimination are hidden by a colorblind frame of progress and meritocracy (2006). Again, from Freeman: “By supplying equal opportunity for everyone through testing programs based on uniform proficiency standards, NCLB disregards the thicket of causal connections that predispose children to educational disadvantage, especially children of color” (194).

One such causal connection is that of funding inequalities, linking the cultural ideology of white privilege to the American political economy. Schools serving the greatest concentrations of poor and minority children require more resources to help students reach high levels of performance, yet these schools often receive fewer resources due to long-standing school funding formulas based on district property taxes (Rubenstein et al. 2006). Based on these formulas, wealthy areas that are often majority white will simply have more funding for schools, while poor areas, like those where many minorities live, rely on state and federal monies to help make up persistent inadequacies. While the argument about inadequate funding for education serves to explain many barriers to educational reform, it also provides one glaring example of how racial ideology is deployed to have a tangible impact on the educational opportunity of minority students and their ability to achieve success.

In the academic fields of education and sociology, the connections between school performance, class, and race have long been established. It is understood, generally, that schools with a greater percentage of economically disadvantaged students and or as well as those with a greater percentage of non-white students will perform worse than those schools with smaller percentages of these students in measures of student achievement. These connections are the subject of much academic

study in light of standards-based accountability systems, both before, and now during, the mandate of NCLB. Two obvious issues, however, confound what seemingly should be a more direct connection between research and policy. First, it seems apparent that the ideology of standards-based education reform and increased accountability has permeated national education policy with persistence that would be commendable if it could be shown to be beneficial. However, “despite the growing popularity of ‘get tough’ measures across the United States, there is scant evidence of the policies’ benefits. In most states and districts, the imposition of sanctions on low-performing schools is still nascent. In a few, ...high-stakes accountability measures have been in place since the early 1990s and experiences have accumulated, but systematic studies of schools that labor under them are sparse” (Mintrop 2004, 3). Often, an illusion of progress is all that is achieved. Progress is generally measured by increasing test scores, and, “as most any urban school teacher can attest, if it is higher scores they want then it is higher scores they will get, even if it is through ‘drill ‘em and test ‘em’ approaches that are part of why there is a critical underachievement in urban schools to begin with” (Carlson 2006, 99).

Second, “policymaking does not move at the speed of research. It moves more slowly when research suggests solutions that go against the grain of public sentiment and more swiftly when, according to the spirit of the times, a policy measure makes intuitive sense as a sorely needed solution to an intractable problem that policymakers feel compelled to address” (Mintrop 2004, 3). As a challenge to the dominant cultural ideology, it does not seem like a fundamental alternative to standards-based policies will surface anytime soon to address persistent academic underachievement. Michael Apple explains that, as the take-for-granted approach to education reform in the American corporate state, the ideology of standards-based reform will continue to close down other options for change (in Carlson 2006, 100).



Freeman also adds that education and education policy is never politically neutral, and will inevitably be conscripted to serve one master or another (2005). In the case of NCLB, policies are structured around 'normal' students, and whiteness and middle-class-ness have, even as race had supposedly become irrelevant, remained very much the norm. Current day education reform is thus also embedded in an ideology of normative whiteness. Bonilla-Silva writes that this is made apparent when 'race' and 'culture' are described as things that racial minorities or the poor have (2006, 116). He explains that expression of a colorblind ideological can be hidden, then, in discussion about 'race' (read: not white) or about 'culture' (read: not white, 'ethnic,' maybe poor). Allington's suggestion that NCLB is more about ideology and less about evidence becomes a little more consequential when one considers the standards-based ideology alongside the normative ideology of whiteness.

While many social scientists are offering explanations for failure that cover a range of structural explanations from inequality to systematic stratification, these data and theories unequivocally indicate that academic underachievement is neither explained nor addressed adequately congressmen on either side of the aisle. While Republicans push to hold schools accountable for student failure and to give students the choice to leave failing schools, and while Democrats advocate allocating more and more money into these schools, the real reasons for failure might indeed be obscured. Standards-based reform and accountability, with all their potential benefits and shortcomings, are the educational reforms du jour. While one can't argue that much has improved in American schools since before *Brown*, the broad achievement gap that remains between poor and minority students and their white and wealthy peers remains a huge failure and continuing challenge. Standards-based reform efforts are admittedly hampered by a lack of sufficient resources and the ever-increasing need for schools to provide more and better services (Sipple 2004), but I believe that enough

evidence exists to show that education reform is itself hampered by the dominant racial, meritocratic, and standards-based ideology in education policy.

### ***The Role of Media Representations***

Bonilla-Silva writes that subscription to an ideology is reflected in the ways individuals present themselves to the world and in the rhetorical strategies they use to articulate its stories (2006, 53). The attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms that accompany an ideology create the shared expectations that define a society and its culture and facilitate communication within that society. It is this communication that I turn to next.

Media scholar Michael Schudson writes: "Media are the visible tip of the iceberg of social influences on human behavior" (2003, 19). In this investigation into the social and cultural context that shapes an understanding of school failure, news articles serve as that visible tip of the iceberg, illustrating the rhetorical strategies used to explain who fails and why. If Americans understand failure in terms of the dominant racial, meritocratic, and standards-based educational ideology, as the very definition of ideology indicates we should, and if the news is representative of the dominant ideology, then an examination of the news discourse on school failure should be illustrative of that ideology. The news reflects and reports on the large mass of culture that it is a part of. A close examination of the news should indicate, in Schudson's terms, what is and is not 'under the water.'

This is the cultural model of media influence, and differs from the perhaps more commonly cited indoctrinational model. The indoctrinational model, a la Marshall McLuhan, posits that the media are all-powerful and that everything else in society flows from them. I disagree with this premise and instead find my view more in line with Clifford Geertz's observation that the news media are not "a power,

something to which social events behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed,” but “a context, something within which they can be intelligibly...described” (quoted in Schudson 2003, 24). The cultural model proposes that the news media influence the audience in two broad ways: first, they help to construct a community of sentiment; second, they help to construct a public conversation (Schudson 2003). Media scholar John Hartley has written that, in these ways, news is “the sense-making practice of modernity” (Schudson 2003, 12). While the news does not create our modern society, it does help us make sense of what is contained therein.

This is not to say that the cultural model suggests that the media do not add something to the stories they run. Schudson explains: “News is not a mirror of reality. It is a representation of the world, and all representations are selective” (2003, 33). Journalists amplify and give legitimacy to the items they report; they tell us that the subject is important. It follows that the amplification and sense-making role of the media is not a neutral activity. Instead, all messages are framed so as to give a particular slant to the story. Media frames organize the world for those who report and for those who rely on their reports. They are “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin 2003, 7).

Historically, sociologists have used the concepts of frames and framing in diverse ways. Erving Goffman first developed the concepts in his 1974 book *Frame Analysis*, characterizing framing as a process through which societies reproduce meaning. Goffman contended that some ‘primary frameworks’ are socially constructed concepts that people may perceive as ‘natural,’ while other primary frameworks directly reflect physical experiences. The study of framing in this rubric is

the study of representation and meaning (Fisher 1997). David Snow and Robert Benford built on the concept of framing to apply it to social movements and collective action around social problems, suggesting that frames overlap and organize the values and beliefs of movement activists, and that individual people control frame production. These scholars express sympathy with many social movements challenging established orthodoxies, and link their theories of framing with practical advice for activists (Fisher 1997). This understanding of framing processes has come to be regarded as a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements. In this context, framing is an action of negotiation of shared meanings and ideas in the construction of reality (Benford and Snow 2000, 612).

William Gamson added the study of media discourse to the understanding of framing. Also primarily studying social movements, Gamson sees the media as not only a central tool in the production of cultural meaning, but also as one of the focal points through which social movements wage their contests to change public policy or perceptions (Fisher 1997).

A fourth main use of frame analysis is in campaigning in the political realm because, as proponent George Lakoff argues: “People think in frames” (2004, 17). To be accepted and understood, political information must fit our frames, not the other way around. Information that we are presented with, even if it is generally regarded as ‘fact,’ will not change our mental frames. Thus, if the news is written using a frame the reader does not possess, she will not understand what is being said, and will dismiss it as foolish nonsense or as fabricated lies. Instead, politicians must provide constituents with a new frame for understanding in order to see an issue differently. Lakoff argues that, most often, we are simply employing those frames that we have been socialized to accept (Lakoff 2004).

These historical uses help construct an understanding of media frames that can inform my analysis. As Kimberly Fisher explains, the historical use of frames can be distilled into an essential understanding in which frames, first, are a part of the discourse that develops in any given culture, and people learn these frames as they learn to competently participate in that culture. Second, they highlight some aspects of an event or issue to which people apply a frame, while hiding others. Third, they organize experiences, values and beliefs of all members of a culture in a systematic and coherent way. Fourth, and lastly, they are accessible and useful to people in the same culture (1997). Used in this way, frames are not ideologies, but can convey an underlying ideology.

Frames are employed in all instances where people interact with the world as a way to interpret information and to inform interaction; a sort of trigger to the shared and durable cultural models of meaning. An issue can be framed to tap into a certain cultural ideology instead of another. In these ways, frames are both necessary tools to understand interaction with one's environment and to communicate with others, and also devices that can obscure certain interpretations of that environment in favor of other interpretations. Our understanding of any one thing is subconsciously framed by previous experience, but can also be consciously and actively framed by others either benignly, to aid in understanding, or more subversively, to achieve an agenda. In either sense it can be understood as a social construct, with the way that the issue is framed directly influencing, as in the discussion above, what society believes can and should be done about it (Fisher 1997).

Framing is as central a concept as there is in the study of news as it moves the analysis of news away from the idea of intentional bias. It is so central because, in our acceptance that news stories frame reality, we accept that it would be impossible to avoid framing. Schudson explains: "Every narrative account of reality necessarily

presents some things and not others; consciously or unconsciously, every narrative makes assumptions about how the world works, what is important, what makes sense, and what should be” (2004, 34-5). A discussion of framing rather than bias, as Schudson goes on to discuss, draws attention to certain traditions and routines of the culture at large.

### ***Frame Analysis as a Cultural Endeavor***

While the literature surrounding frame analysis is diverse, my understanding and use of frames parallels that of Fisher, who explains: “Cultural frame analysis enables scholars to study how people understand an issue, and to track the way in which this understanding changes over time... Scholars cannot identify frames by counting the appearance of key words and phrases, or by specific argumentative structures. Instead, one must look for storylines about what is to be comprehended. Researchers have successfully identified a cultural frame when they can interchange the frame for the topic of the text without changing the meaning of the text. Since cultural frames lack fixed and quantifiable markers, frame analysis methodology may well only provide useful information to researchers studying cultures of which they are members” (1997). Thus, with an understanding of the dominant American cultural and educational ideology and the realities of inequality of opportunity, I can examine the news for those voices and points of view that are heard and those that are not.

To employ frame analysis in an analysis of media content is to seek a clearer picture of cultural dynamics (Koenig 2005). Diana Kendall, in her book *Framing Class*, discusses the way that dominant understandings of race, class, and gender can be seen clearly permeating media content (Kendall 2005, 3). She argues that socioeconomic dimensions such as location of residence or school affiliation are often used in the media as proxies for class; I argue that these same references are often

stand-ins for race. Both race and class, especially in conversations of student achievement or failure, seem taboo. It is much easier, and safer, to make the same point by referencing inner city or suburban neighborhoods or schools. This echoes what Freeman and Bonilla-Silva found in their investigations into colorblind racism. The racialized ideas of privilege are still very present in our society, but have been subsumed into the understanding of privilege as stemming from merit-based traits of individuals.

Framing is the central way in which the media emphasize some ideological perspectives over others, and manipulate salience by directing attention to certain ideas while ignoring others. Using frame analysis, then, allows the researcher to examine the dominant ideological perspectives in the news media by noting what ideas are used and what are not to explain the same cultural issue or social problem in multiple news articles.

### ***Postscript on Making the News: Events and Bad News***

A study of the news, however, contains some possible pitfalls, as explained by Schudson (2003). First, it tends to be event-centered, action-centered, and person-centered, focusing on visible events and often on conflict. Issues and processes generally don't make the news; when they do, they tend to be simplified in ways that emphasize melodrama, and that turn complex phenomena into morality tales between good guys and bad guys.

Second, news tends to be bad news. Schudson explains that things going badly trigger the news instinct. He quotes media scholar Tamar Liebes, "Western journalism is a social warning system, exposing the exception rather than the rule, the deviant rather than the norm, disorder rather than order, dissonance rather than harmony" (50).

While these tendencies certainly contribute to distortion in the news, in the case of this study they can also provide certain benefits. I choose to incorporate these ‘pitfalls’ into my study, as explained in the following chapter. With the conceptual understanding of the above ideological perspectives, standards and normative whiteness, that shape current education reform, I next will look to news articles to help show me how school failure is understood in the current cultural, social, and political landscape.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA AND METHODS

The examination of media content has traditionally been the most common type of media analysis, explain media scholars David Croteau and William Hoynes (2003), because of the easy accessibility of media products. Newspaper articles, the subject of this study, are written far from the prying eyes, open notebooks, and recording machines that are the tools of many sociological researchers. Journalists write for an audience that will read the article and identify with the point of view contained therein; they generally do not think about what types of evidence a researcher might find in their words. Because of this, newspaper articles allow us interesting access into representations of the external world that are created to resonate with that world. Croteau and Hoynes, like Schudson, caution that media content does not reflect the realities of the social world. They argue that no representation of reality can ever be ‘real’ since it must inevitably frame an issue and choose to include or exclude certain components of a multifaceted reality. It is these gaps between media content and social reality that raise interesting questions and warrant our attention. Specifically, these gaps can highlight the differences between official or normative explanations and between explanations of the powerless or minorities. Media scholar John Fiske explains: “No discourse event is ever complete in itself but always carries traces of the other, competing, discourse events that it is not...Discourse is always a terrain of struggle, but the struggle is never conducted on a level field. The dominant discourses, those that occupy the mainstream, serve dominant social interests, for they are products of the history that has secured their domination” (Fiske 1996, 4). Armed with a sociological understanding of structural inequalities, I explore media content as

a gauge of the dominant American cultural norms, values, and interests around school failure.

### ***Research Hypothesis***

In order to understand how failure of schools and failure in schools is represented in the media, I developed a research hypothesis from the theoretical framework laid out in the previous chapter. Based on my interpretation of the literature, I predict that the media will frame the reasons for failure in keeping with both the “official” reasons explicit in NCLB and the implicit cultural reasons explained by theories of colorblind racism and normative whiteness. In keeping with this hypothesis, failure would be explained by the ‘official’ reasons of low standards for students, poor quality teachers, little parental involvement, and unproven teaching strategies. Reasons for failure stemming from an ideology of implicit racism would explain failure as being anything that is not within the normative white middle-class. These would be explanations focused on the culture of minorities, poor people, or inner-city residents, or perhaps on the very existence of these populations in schools. Both categories of explanations would be superficial and proximate, and would not deal with ultimate issues of structural inequalities.

To test my hypothesis, I take advantage of Schudson’s twin cautions: that the news media focuses on events and on bad news. I argue that NCLB has created many events of failure, and that it is this very characteristic of the news that allows me access to cultural understandings of failure at this historic moment. That my study focuses on failure, which is hard to conceive of in anyway but negative, also lets me take advantage of his second caution. NCLB creates events out of a negative social condition; the created events are thus ‘bad news.’ In addition to providing a window into what might otherwise be an un-reported social problem of school failure, these

characteristics of the news should also increase the number of news articles that exist as potential data, possibly making my study stronger by increasing the sample size I can obtain and the size of the pool from which I sample.

### ***Sample***

I situated my study in my home state of New York. Through growing up and attending public schools here, I have a clearer picture of the history and character of New York in general, and of its education system in particular, than I do of any other state. I also have a greater stake in the research as a resident and as a student at New York's land grant university. New York has a particular history as an early adopter of standards-based education reform, with their Board of Regents setting a time line for standardizing subject exams and diploma requirements in the decade before NCLB. So, while similar research could have taken place anywhere in the United States, the context of New York is particular, and the setting makes it better informed and more compelling to this researcher.

To obtain articles on school failure in New York State, I used the newspaper catalogues in three online databases: NewsBank, Factiva, and Lexis Nexis. Limiting the search to newspapers in New York State, I searched with the key words *school* and *failure* to identify a range of articles, from August 2000 to October 2006, that deal with school failure in New York State. The dates of the articles sampled bridge the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act into the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. As described above, this act has in many ways redefined, or at least given us new ways to label, school failure. By including articles on both sides of this legislation, I hoped to capture any changes in media representations of failure it may have wrought.

I settled on a sample size of 100 articles: I hoped this would give me a large enough sample to make generalizations, but small enough to permit close reading. Other than the general search criteria stated above, I started the search process without paying much attention to where or when the articles were coming from. Other than specifying pre- and post-NCLB, my hypothesis is not necessarily time-bound, and, other than my focus on New York, is not place-bound. Within the dates, newspapers, and search terms, though, there were over eighteen thousand articles. I experimented with other search terms and with different combinations of place and time, but I felt that those constraints all excluded too many of the articles that dealt with the broader topic of school failure. Because of this relative broadness, I had a lot of weeding out of appropriate articles—those that were actually about school failure as I conceive it and not about the failure of this school’s track team to make states or this school’s failure to pass their budget. Articles of this type made up for the majority of false hits. While weeding out appropriate articles, I quickly skimmed for content, but nothing else. I did not set specific criteria other than to include it if it was actually on school failure, as explained above. Even though I proceeded this way through scores of articles, the 100 were slow in coming. Each one that fit was an exciting find. This openness of criteria and lack a particular article selection method within my broad search terms, however, was likely not ideal. In future work, I will know to pay more attention to the variety over time and newspaper of my articles.

Many ( $n = 34$ ) of my articles come from the *New York Times*, initially only because the *Times* simply carried more articles on education than do smaller local papers. Interestingly, though, I found that my somewhat disproportionate (although not to population or to number of failing schools local to this paper) reliance on these articles has some academic support. The journalist Jack Lule has stated, “More than any other U.S. news medium, the *New York Times* has become crucial reading for

those interested in the news, national politics, and international affairs. Understanding the *Times* has become a necessary part of understanding the times.” He goes on to argue that stories that appear in the *Times* carry great weight and often make their way to other news sources (cited in Kendall 2005, 11).

In addition to the *Times*, my articles come from thirteen of the next largest newspapers in the state: *The Buffalo News*, *The Post-Standard* (Syracuse), *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, *The Times Union* (Albany), *Observer-Dispatch* (Utica), *Watertown Daily Times*, *The Daily News* (Batavia), *The Daily Gazette* (Schenectady), *Poughkeepsie Journal*, *The Saratogan* (Saratoga Springs), *The Journal News* (Westchester), *Newsday* (Long Island), and *The New York Daily News*. Some larger newspapers that might have been included but were not are the *Press and Sun-Bulletin* (Binghamton) and *The Ithaca Journal*. This omission, as well as the numbers of articles found in each of the other papers, was not intentional. I simply searched all New York newspapers available in these databases using the same dates and search terms. That my sample contains certain newspapers and not others, as well as a range of numbers of articles from different newspapers (from  $n = 34$  from *The New York Times* and  $n = 26$  from *The Buffalo News* to from an  $n = 1$  from five newspapers, can be explained by a number of likely factors other than my chance selection. New York City and Buffalo simply have the most failing schools in the state; it is therefore not surprising that they have the most articles with these terms. The newspapers from these cities are also the larger papers in the state, and have more space to devote to education topics than do other papers and a larger staff that can cover more content. A few Buffalo editorials claim that Buffalonians are the most contentious of all New Yorkers—that too might be an explanation for a disproportionately large number from Buffalo. In any case, the sample does cut through a variety of New York State newspapers, and should be representative of both the similar issues faced by New

York residents and the diverse issues faced by urban and rural, rich and poor, and white and minority residents.

### *Analysis*

In conducting my research, I wanted to allow the frames used to understand failure to emerge organically from the articles. To do this, I read a random sub-sample of twenty-five articles and took notes on how failure was explained, who was responsible for failure, and how it could be remedied. I found code saturation after reading fewer than a dozen articles. This similarity implied that the articles are very definitely sticking to certain ways of framing failure. From the dominant explanations that emerged in this first partial reading, I had a general idea of what I would find and what sort of differences to keep my eyes open for. I knew that most articles framed failure simply, with only one explanation, but that others were more complex, and included either different interpretations of events or actors with opposing points of view. With this in mind, I wrote up a coding sheet to include with each article (Appendix A). In my next reading I completed the coding sheet, divided the articles by dominant frame, and noted what, if any, secondary frames were used in telling each particular story of school failure. What emerged was a clear story of how we understand and explain success and failure in our schools.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I tested my hypothesis by analyzing the content of my sample of newspaper articles to determine the frames employed to explain school failure. Based on my interpretation of the literature, I predict that the media will frame the reasons for failure in keeping with both the “official” reasons explicit in NCLB and the implicit cultural reasons explained by theories of colorblind racism and normative whiteness. In keeping with this hypothesis, failure would be explained by the “official” reasons of low standards for students, poor quality teachers, little parental involvement, and unproven teaching strategies. Reasons for failure stemming from an ideology of implicit racism would explain failure as being anything that is not within the normative white middle-class. These would be explanations focused on the culture of minorities, poor people, or inner-city residents or perhaps on the very existence of these populations in schools. Both categories of explanations would be superficial and proximate, and would not deal with ultimate issues of structural inequalities.

#### *Overview*

Eleven frames used to explain failure emerged from this analysis. The five most common are employed to explain failure in 75 percent of the articles. These are: Tremendous Pressure, that maintains that unreachable policies make success impossible; Academic Shortchanging, that explains that schools fail because they fail to meet the diverse needs of students; Home Effect, that blames failure on a home environment that does not support learning; Bad Tests, that argues that schools are failing because the students are given poorly written, inappropriate, or arbitrary tests;

and Not Enough Funding, that ascribes failure to a lack of funding sufficient to implement new policies or to provide for needs of all students. The next six are less common, but are equally distinct. They are: Public School Structure, that explains that the schools are failing because of the way they and the districts are structured; Subgroups, that maintains that the schools aren't failing—there is only failure in the subgroups of minority, poor, or disabled students; Being On The List, that simply explains that schools are failing because they are listed as Schools in Need of Improvement; Poor School Leadership, that attributes school failure to leaders who are ineffective; One Size Does Not Fit All, that posits that the schools are failing because they are trying to fit one teaching or learning style on a diverse student body; and the last, Fear of Listing, that explains that certain schools that are failing their students aren't "failing" because they are afraid to be listed and instead resort to misreporting data.

The table below (Table 1) lists each frame in declining order of its appearance as the primary frame. The second column is the number of articles in which the frame was used as the primary interpretive device, while the third column includes the total number of times a frame is used, including its secondary use as either an alternative point of view or as an explanation in support of the larger story that "failure is happening." That number, the times that the frame was employed as a supplement to a primary frame, is included in parentheses.



Table 1: The Frames and their Prevalence

<b>FRAME</b>	<b>#PRIMARY</b>	<b>#ANCILLARY</b>	<b>#TOTAL</b>
Tremendous Pressure	21	1	22
Academic Shortchanging	17	5	22
Home Effect	13	6	19
Bad Tests	13	5	18
Not Enough Funding	11	8	19
Public School Structure	7	7	15
Subgroups	7	3	10
Being On List	7	1	8
Poor School Leadership	2	0	2
One Size Does Not Fit All	1	8	9
Fear Of Listing	1	1	2

### ***The Frames***

The most used frame I call the Tremendous Pressure or “Mission Impossible” frame, that posits that the schools are failing because the tremendous pressure of the policy, especially increasing AYP targets, makes success impossible. “Tremendous pressure” comes from the mouth of the New York State Education Commissioner Richard P. Mills, as in, “Mills suggested that the eight-grade results might have remained constant because of the ‘tremendous pressure’ the state put on schools in the last few years to improve their middle school results” (Pasciak and Simon, The Buffalo News, 12 Oct 2006). This, though, is used to explain last year’s success. This

year, the tremendous pressure from the state did not seem to be enough, and the authors bend Mills's words to explain why success is a "mission impossible" in light the ever-increasing pressure of higher yearly standards. A principal argues that NCLB is "setting impossibly high standards," that the law is "impractical and burdensome" (Winerip, The New York Times, 1 Oct 2003).

Second most common is Academic Shortchanging, a frame that declares that the schools are failing because they fail miserably in meeting the needs of students, especially students that are already performing poorly. The name of this frame also comes directly from the text, although in this instance a much more heartrending picture is evoked. A parent in Albany "was among about 30 people who marched down Washington Avenue behind a black cardboard coffin to draw attention to what they believe is the academic shortchanging of young black schoolchildren" (Nearing, The Times Union (Albany), 17 Aug 2006). Only 4 of the 16 articles with this frame dominant, however, talk specifically about schools shortchanging minority students. More talk about students that are already struggling and who, with increased demands placed on teachers, are not getting the types of instruction and increased attention that would be necessary to help them succeed. Many of these articles are more emotional than those that are framed as Tremendous Pressure. Part of this is the actors that are quoted: this frame relies on the raw emotion of parents more than the focused anger and frustration of administrators in the first. This is indicative of the primary difference between these first two frames: both explain the policies as unfair, but the first talks about the impossible pressure on the schools to meet them, and the second about the students that are suffering from the schools' approach to meeting them. Both, though, are often specifically aimed at NCLB policies. This frame targets the policy more broadly and with less specific information. Parents are quoted saying, "They say it's all part of No Child Left Behind, but we feel that our child is being left

so far behind he can't even be seen" (Kryszak, *The Buffalo News*, 13 Jun 2006) and "If there's no child left behind, what the hell happened here? (Miller, *The Times Union* (Albany), 7 May 2006). They ask generally why the policy is making the failure that has always existed a now acceptable and necessary part of the school landscape, and what will happen to their children that have become the victims of this failure. This frame takes a generally broad approach to explaining failure, calling failure to educate all students an enduring dilemma in American schools. One article begins by making this connection between American and failure: "One word [used as the title of an essay on our country] epitomizes a teenager's struggle in a failing school: 'Amarica,'" and goes on to say the district has made a promise to educate students on which it has never followed through (Miller, *The Times Union* (Albany), 7 May 2006).

Those reporters that do specifically connect academic shortchanging to minority students do so with vigor. The first article cited in this frame used stories of the schools failing to educate the urban black children living under the shadow of the Capital in Albany, and two more, both by the same local reporter, Mark Hare, talk about the "education ghettos" that city schools become when the white middle class bails out. Hare talks specifically about the gross academic shortchanging that is the de facto segregation of urban schools. Poor black children, he explains, "used to be far more successful in school—when they sat alongside middle-class and rich students, when everyone was part of the same community with shared values and expectations" (Hare, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 23 Aug 2000). This aspect of the frame, though, does not bring in a discussion of larger societal inequities like it might. Hare, as an example, keeps the argument close to the schools: "The system can't overcome the overwhelming effects of poverty on its own. The solution is going to have to involve the rest of the school districts in the Rochester area" (ibid).

This frame got a little play in big Upstate cities (Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse) in 2000, but then disappeared only to resurface in 2006 in Albany and the NY Times. It never showed up again elsewhere in the Upstate news coverage.

The third frame, Home Effect, actually makes the Academic Shortchanging frame a little clearer. The Home Effect frame explains that students are failing because their home environment does not support learning. In this, it is the converse of the Academic Shortchanging frame which can be re-stated as such: the frame explains failure as students failing because their school environment does not support their particular learning needs. We thus have school effect as an accompaniment to this new frame, Home Effect.

What I found, though, is that while the Academic Shortchanging frame discusses ‘our children,’ the Home Effect frame universally discusses ‘those children.’ The “inherited traits of students” and “ineffective parenting” of some students contribute to failure, and we need to stop “trying to ignore the statistical fact that not everyone can be above average,” realize there are some things that the schools can’t touch, and learn to make a place for failure in our schools (Cummins, *The Daily Gazette* (Schenectady), 15 Jan 2006). The articles framed in this way commonly refer to poor, black, Hispanic, and inner city students, as well as students from broken homes or homes where English is not spoken. This frame clearly suggests that there is one right type of home to come from: only if you are white and not poor can you avoid either personal failure to perform well or the bad luck of attending a “failure school.” In an interesting twist, two articles, both by guest essayists (one of whom is a sociology professor emeritus) use well-known authors in the field to back up their case against the learning potential of “those children.” One discusses the unrealistic “smoke and mirrors” approach of Jonathan Kozol, who suggests that suburbanites should move into cities (Woityra, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 20 Apr 2006)

while the other cited James Coleman's findings as discussed in the Coleman Report as evidence why NCLB can't help 'those children' (Lewis and Hooper, *The Buffalo News*, 20 Jul 2003).

The next most common way to frame failure is as Bad Tests: The schools are failing because the students are given poorly written, inappropriate, or arbitrary tests. One principal is quoted saying, "It's catastrophic for the self-esteem of a child who has to sit and endure a test like this. It's equivalent to educational genocide" (Rae and Gomstyn, *The Journal News* (Westchester County), 1 Oct 2006). These articles mostly focus on New York State Regents tests, and a couple at one specific Regents math test that the state eventually admitted was flawed, and schools were given the choice to drop their students' results. Half of the articles do, though, throw in NCLB as a generally bad direction to go for students that are already over-tested. They discuss the high stakes tests as a particularly bad move, worrying what will happen to the majority of students who are failing in schools where the need for remedial help is the rule rather than the exception. Students in New York are hit especially hard because they must pass more of these exams than do their peers in any other state. Explains one state senator: "I don't know what's so magical about five high-stakes exit exams when we are the only one carrying that banner" (Precious, *The Buffalo News*, 23 Oct 2003).

The fifth way to frame failure is as Not Enough Funding: The schools are failing because they don't have enough funding to implement new policies or to provide for needs of all students. While the articles in this frame generally show simple and unconcealed criticism for NCLB, they do it in a remarkably colorful way. Some discuss the politics of NCLB, that lack of adequate funding has turned NCLB into "a political slogan rather than the solemn oath it was intended to be to our nation's students, parents, and teachers" (Pickler (AP), *The Buffalo News*, 6 Oct

2006) and that this “cheaping out on No Child Left Behind” makes “Washington’s game-playing with the education of at-risk children...particularly shameful” (Editorial, The Buffalo News, 24 Sep 2006). Additionally, the funding realities of NCLB are “so poorly put together...The more you know about it, the more you hate it. They didn’t give us a Lexus; they gave us a Yugo” (Editorial, Poughkeepsie Journal, 19 May 2006). These articles say failure is directly attributed to the ‘cheap car’ they were given to try to get students from one point to the next.

The next six frames are each used as the dominant frame in fewer than ten articles, but each emerged clearly as explaining failure in ways distinctly different from the five most common frames. The first among the last is the Public School Structure frame, that explains that the schools are failing because of the way they and the districts are structured: they have little control over curriculum and no flexibility, or the traditional school structure is outdated, or there not enough competition in the public school structure to encourage innovation. These articles argue, among other things, that “the American high school has died and no one knows it” (Rivers, The Daily News (Batavia), 3 May 2006). They argue that failure is generally a problem of limited access to free-market solutions, and that, as a local pastor hastens to argue: “Without the opportunity of a charter school, many of these kids would slip through the cracks. They’d drop out of school, and when that happens, they may do a number of things, from drugs to hard crime (Micheltmore, The Buffalo News, 20 Aug 2006).

Next, the Subgroups frame explains that the schools *aren’t* failing, only the subgroups of minority, poor, or disabled students are. Not only does this frame place failure clearly on the heads of ‘those children’ in a way similar to the Home Effect frame, but it also explicitly separate those students from the ‘normal’ students in the school. One local administrator explains: “I certainly wouldn’t want an article to

portray that Schenectady is failing all kids, there are students who are struggling, and it's the subgroups (Martialay, The Daily Gazette (Schenectady), 15 May 2006).

The next frame also rejects the notion of school failure. The On The List frame, arguably the least complex frame that emerged, explains that schools are failing because they are listed as Schools in Need of Improvement. A few argue "failing" doesn't mean failing, especially because everybody's doing it: "It's just a matter of time before we see upwards of 10,000 schools in restructuring" (Feller (AP) The Times Union (Albany), 10 May 2006).

The Poor School Leadership frame explains failure as just that: the schools are failing because their leaders are ineffective. The articles framed this way argue: "If the success of a school can be attributed to its leaders, then the same can be said of its failures" (Editorial, The Buffalo News, 18 Nov 2001).

The One Size Does Not Fit All frame emerged as a dominant frame in only one article, but was much more common as a secondary frame. This frame posits that the schools are failing because they are trying to fit one teaching or learning style on a diverse student body.

The last frame, Fear of Listing, is a bit of a pointing-the-finger frame, and explains that certain schools (they do name names, of course) that are failing to educate all their students aren't "failing" because they are afraid to be listed and instead resort to misreporting data.

### ***Summary***

The dominant descriptions of failure, as evidenced in the emergence of the above frames, clearly supports my hypothesis about how we tell ourselves the story of failure. Based on my interpretation of the literature, I predicted that the media will frame the reasons for failure in keeping with both the 'official' reasons explicit in

NCLB, and the implicit cultural reasons explained by theories of colorblind racism and normative whiteness. In keeping with this hypothesis, much school failure is indeed explained by what I interpret to be ‘official’ reasons, or those that were used in the initial fashioning of NCLB policies. I contend that even some of those frames that argue the policy is ‘bad’ can be seen to be in keeping with the ‘official’ explanations of failure. For example, while the Tremendous Pressure frame focuses on the impossibilities of NCLB, a more meticulous interpretation of the frame suggests that the reason these new standards are such a tremendous pressure for schools is because of historically low standards for students. The articles framed as Tremendous Pressure give little explanation for why the meeting the standards is so impossible, other than to suggest that it is “too much” and “burdensome.” Whether this is true or not, the Tremendous Pressure frame can be seen to be in line with the very reasoning for implementing NCLB—it simply says that this is hard because our students are not as well-schooled as they should be. These higher standards will compel schools to work harder and to improve instruction to make sure to meet them.

The Academic Shortchanging frame can also be interpreted under this rubric. From the point of view of families rather than schools, this frame also argues that our students are not as well-schooled as they should be. Again, the ‘official’ reasons for implementation of NCLB are suggested here: poor quality teachers, poorly administered schools, and unproven teaching strategies result in students who lag far behind where the policy tells us they should be.

These two frames, accounting for 38 percent of the articles, seem to clearly fall into the first hypothesized category of ‘official’ reasons. Clearly, the Public School Structure and Poor School Leadership frames would also even more explicitly fall in this category. The Not Enough Funding, Being On The List, and Fear of Listing frames also each explain interpretations in which success and failure are circumscribed



by the policy language. In each instance, the schools define success and failure through the lens of NCLB, whether they think success is possible for them or not. In total, frames in keeping with ‘official’ narratives of success and failure account for sixty-six percent of the articles in my sample.

Reasons for failure stemming from an ideology of implicit racism explain failure as being anything that is not within the normative white middle-class. These explanations focus on the culture of minorities, poor people, or inner-city residents, or perhaps on the very existence of these populations in schools. The Home Effect and Subgroups frame weigh in heavily in this category. While the first category of explanations concerns “our children,” this category, without exception, discusses “those children.” While the notion that our culture sees only one way to be a ‘normal’ student was a central part of my hypothesis, I did not expect to see the evidence so blatantly. The articles framed in these ways construct success as the province of white and well-off students, or those minorities who can rise above their fate and act white. Failure is the province of poor, black, Hispanic, inner-city students, or those students who speak English as a second language. Failure is for these students, who are just not ‘normal,’ and who, in these articles, can be either blamed for bringing their schools down with them or ignored because all the ‘normal’ students are succeeding. What I find particularly interesting is how the language of ‘subgroups’ has come to stand for any minority. NCLB seems to have become a tool of colorblindness in the hands of the news media, a new way to avoid explicitly talking about race and racial prejudice, all the while communicating and reinforcing those very prejudices. The two frames that support an ideology of implicit racism account for twenty percent of the articles in my sample.

A slight challenge to the dominant paradigm comes from some of the remaining fourteen percent of the articles that don’t fit neatly into these two

explanatory categories. The Bad Tests frame alternately accepts some testing, while just claiming that there are too many or that some are bad; and rejects testing, arguing that assessment and advancement based solely on tests is no way to teach students. It is this latter argument, present in some articles that are frame failure as the result of bad tests, which challenges the acceptance of the standards-based educational ideology.

Another potential challenge comes from the One Size Does Not Fit All frame, which blames failure on trying to fit all students into the same mold. This frame does not take on a mantle of normative whiteness, wherein there is one clear right way to be a student. Instead, it argues that there are many types of students, and all are fine—the problem, then, is that these diverse students exist in a policy world that interprets success so narrowly. That this frame is often used as a secondary explanation for why failure occurs leads me to only partially place it outside the first category of official explanations. Sometimes, the argument that all students are different is used to underscore the ‘official’ argument that we need more highly qualified teachers who know how to reach all students, and thus achieve the same successful outcomes. Other times, however, this frame does indeed challenge the idea that there is one way to measure success. Articles framed in this way present an alternative to the idea of a ‘normal’ student.

While there were suggestions of a challenge to the dominant ideological understanding of failure, they end up being just that: a suggestion. As I examine the way these articles frame failure in American schools, I see questioning in only a few. There is much discontent, but it is largely discontent circumscribed by a dominant ideology characterized by beliefs in the merit of individual achievement and equality of opportunity that conceals persistent structural inequalities. The discontent might be

directed at the described in the last chapter and, paradoxically, can preserve this unequal status quo.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Newspaper articles are not, of course, where one would generally go to find points of view that challenge take-for-granted assumptions, or that even challenge one to think critically at all. The news media help to construct a community of sentiment and they help to construct a public conversation; they provide us one way to make sense of what is contained in our modern society. The frames the news media employ organize the world for those who report and for those who rely on their reports. These news media necessarily use frames that resonate with the dominant understanding of the world: this is the only way that people would buy, read, and accept the content as actual news, as truth.

The newspaper articles used in this study thus present a severely limited view of reality, but likely present a fairly authentic view of the dominant community of sentiment and public conversation around school failure. My literature review established the contestation of the dominant narratives of failure and success in American schools, but the media analysis indicated the continued strength of the dominant cultural narrative. Americans understand their society to be meritocratic, to be colorblind, and to offer equality of opportunity for all. When presented with failure, we construct an explanation around the individual: an individual student, a teacher, an administrator; or even an individual school, a neighborhood, a race. If we understand success to be equally available to all, then the only way we can understand failure is as an individual shortcoming. Failure shows us who isn't trying hard enough, who resides out of the mainstream, and who isn't normal.

Todd Gitlin argued that any analytic approach to mass-mediated content must end by asking: What difference do the frames make for the larger world? I believe that the effect of these frames is twofold: first, it continues public conversation centered on the dominant narrative of success and failure. With little challenge to this narrative, we continue to conceal real structural inequalities that make success all but impossible for many students. With little news content framed in opposition to the received narrative, this narrative continues to be taken for granted as the truth, and other narratives, should they be heard, are dismissed as fabrications.

Second, by concealing the existence of structural inequalities and limiting the conversation around explanations of failure, these frames can impede efforts to at effective reform. A recent *Education Week* commentary by sociologist Amy Stuart Wells underscores this point (Wells 2006). In her commentary, Wells reflected on the voluntary school integration cases from Jefferson County, KY, and Seattle, WA, now being decided in the US Supreme Court. She wrote of the legacy of the *Brown* decision, and marveled that seven studies, cited in footnote 11 of the decision, provided the grounds to declare the long-established system of de jure segregation unconstitutional. The ability of social science research to be such a powerful tool in the hands of the powerful inspired Wells to become a social scientist, to speak truth to power in the same way that the seven authors of those studies were able to do in *Brown*.

Wells and colleagues sent an amicus curiae brief to the Supreme Court in support of the voluntary attempts of the two districts to racially balance their schools, now under fire for using racial classification of students as a factor in school placement. While few argue with *Brown*'s goal of racially diverse schools, it seems possible that the court will rule against the use of racial classifications of students as a means to achieve that goal. In other words, while it would be nice if we could have

racial balance, we can't use race as a factor to achieve that balance. Wells of course draws attention to the fallacy of this argument, but she also discusses what is, to her, even more troubling. Wells's amicus curiae brief was only one of fifty-one such briefs filed in support of Jefferson County and Seattle, and together they cite hundreds of studies, indeed the overwhelming social science evidence, on the positive long-term effects of school desegregation, on the harms of segregation and concentrated poverty, and of the difficulty of achieving racial diversity without race-conscious policies (40). One brief alone, submitted by The Civil Rights Project, carried the signatures of 553 social scientists in support of its position. In light of this, the evidence for the plaintiffs is almost negligible, or as Wells quotes one assistant counsel: "It's 553 to six" (32). When we remember that seven studies were seen as plenty of evidence for *Brown*, it is alarming that a similar case today would not be decided similarly with such overwhelming corroboration of its benefit.

While many argue that it is not the role of the Court to 'legislate from the bench,' *Brown* provides ample precedent to allow for the continuation of these race-conscious programs that challenge the entrenchment of segregation. However, it seems quite possible that these policies will be declared unconstitutional. Wells argues that the "simple truth is that there is no basis, except for political ideology, to render such a decision" (32). This, I argue, is the more insidious effect that simple media frames can have for the larger world. While the news media do not create an ideology, they do use frames in service of that ideology to explain the world to their readers. By framing the news so overwhelmingly in accordance with the dominant cultural ideology, the news media can both conceal the existence of structural inequalities and impede efforts of effective reform. The example of this case shows just how far such impediment can extend.

In this thesis, I incorporated the concept of media framing into a critical discourse analysis to show that, in the news discourse around school failure, the dominant American narrative of meritocracy, colorblindness, and equality of opportunity for all may conceal the underlying structural inequalities that create failure in our society in general and our education system in particular. The standards-based reform efforts of policies like NCLB have been shown to be in service of this ideology, and show little promise of producing success in our schools. Success might be possible if we could, like the authors of those seven studies used to decide *Brown*, speak truth to power; if other evidence was incorporated into policy decisions and if other voices were included in public conversations. This thesis suggests that, lately, power just isn't listening.

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